An Exploration of Women's Chronic Ailments in Selected Literary Works

SHORT SYNOPSIS

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by

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ABSTRACT

Pain as an experiential category is different from other somatic experiences, in that it is heavily dependent not only for its mitigation but also for its avowal on outside perceptual forces. Given pain's highly contingent nature it is reasonable to talk about the experience of pain as a gendered affective register. Even when gender is acknowledged as a contributing factor in women's pain, these conversations are often limited to representations of descriptions ofsexual assault, childbirth and, fairly recently menstruation. The experiences of chronic female pain especially those that aren't solely mediated through the genitalia, lack both representation and a theoretical vocabulary to talk about them productively. In engagement with literary representations of women's pain the research hopes to demonstrate that there are distinct experiences of chronic pain heavily dependent on gender identity, that have nothing to do with the genitalia and that on analysis of the same an observable pattern emerges.

Keywords: Pain, Gender, Chronic ailments, Women, Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Pain as an experiential category is different from other somatic experiences, in that it is heavily dependent not only for its mitigation but also for its avowal on outside perceptual forces. Given pain's highly contingent nature it is reasonable to talk about the experience of pain as a gendered affective register. Even when gender is acknowledged as a contributing factor in women's pain, these conversations are often limited to representations of descriptions ofsexual assault, childbirth and, fairly recently menstruation. The experiences of chronic female pain given that they aren't mediated through the genitalia lack both representation and a theoretical vocabulary to talk about them productively. Within the underrepresented subset invisible afflictions, Chronic ailments get almost no critical attention. In engagement with literary representations of women's pain this undertaking hopes to demonstrate that there are experiences of Chronic pain heavily dependent on gender identity, that have nothing to do with the genitalia, and yet somehow primarily affect women and that on analysis of the same an observable pattern emerges.

Although this undertaking is predicated upon the lack of space and representation of chronic ailments women's pain, It would be factually incorrect to say that there are none. Narratives do exist across genres of memoir and fiction alike: *Two Girls* Staring *at a Ceiling* by Lucy Frank, *Get a Life Chole Brown* by Talia Hibert, *Diary of a Mad Lupus Patient* by J.H. Jhonson, *SICK: a Memoir* by Porochista Khakpour, and *Through the Shadowlands* by Julie Rehmeyer.

A review of the available theoretical apparatus reveals that "physical pain as such has received less critical attention than either disability as an identity category or psychological conditions like grief and depression" (Mintz 7). The existing theoretical apparatus needs to shift the focus away from female sexual organs while still trying to represent a gendered phenomenological worldview, and chronic pain is precisely such an area where such an analysis would be useful as women are more likely to have chronic illness and also to report more severe symptoms. (O'Neill 1)

Another important distinction this theoretical work hopes to establish is chronic ailment's independence from the genetalia while retaining and emphasizing the "feminine" character of the pain narratives being described and analyzed. In other words these are naratives of women's lives or female characters (self identified as such) that are going through these types of experiences precisely because they are women. The ailments they have : Lupus, Fibromyalgia , Lyme Disease, IBS and CFS are all found predominantly in women. Additionally no link has been found as to why these are found more commonly in women than in men, no relation to certain hormones or uterus etc. Here the research project could take a

whole deep dive into what it means to be a woman and whether genetalia and the deliberate distinction being established is a redundant when the point is to look at a typically feminized perception , response and treatment of the experience of identifying as a woman and having a "womanly" pain that isn't menstruation or childbirth or rape.

But for the purposes of creating a close ended hermeneutic circle, anyone who self identifies in the course of the narrative as a woman is treated as one for analysis and interpretation. Furthermore nothing exists in isolation at the heart of this analysis are also descriptions of how women are treated at the hands of medical practitioners , family , friends , institutions, workspaces and partners when they are chronically sick which may have some overlap with how they are treated when they are sick but not chronically so.

Research thusfar has indicated conversations around women's mental health and "genital" ailments and an extensive focus on childbirth, the focus on chronic illness has been taken us precisely because there is a gap in the field

A theoretical methodology should ideally evolve to be able to talk about feminine pain in literary representations productively. It is of course, a valid criticism to assert that this line of thinking can become a slippery slope into essentialist ideology and that "the moment we start talking about wounded women, we risk transforming their suffering from an aspect of the female experience into an element of the female constitution- perhaps its finest, frailest consummation" (Jamison 115). However, it might behoove us to consider that an opening up of the theory of pain would allow for more dimensions of the female experience to be articulated and if done carefully would amount to more than a repetition of established stereotypes. Additionally, the flip side hasn't been considered enough (as the literature review will reveal). Important insights emerge when we consider this research gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Bourke, Joanna. *The Story of Pain*. 2017**

  Despite experiential and recorded evidence, foremost theoreticians on pain claim "if a person describes her experiences as 'painful' they are. For the purposes of historical analysis, so long as someone says they are suffering that claim is accepted" (Joanna Burke 3). Bourke claims this right at the outset of her seminal work, *The Story of Pain,* and generalizations like hers are abundant in pain scholarship. This misrepresentation of prevalent mistreatment points to a gap in the research and provides an entry point into examining what an affectively grounded analysis of pain could look like.

Jackson, Gabrielle. Pain and Prejudice: A Call to Arms for Women and Their Bodies, Hachette UK, 2019.

Gabrielle Jackson undertakes an investigation of how women's pain is treated and

examined across the world. She finds a shocking prevalence of sexism in not only how the institution of medicine treats its women patients but also how medical research is conducted and funded across the globe (To the point where even female mice are excluded from research undertaken for new drugs!). She points to what she calls as the prevalence of the diagnoses of hysteria in 'difficult' women despite it being disregarded as a legitimate medical concern. Her extensive journalistic investigation talks in depth about how uninformed we are about the female anatomy as well as primarily 'female' and chronic afflictions like fibromyalgia, ME/CFS, lupus and the lot. She deftly chronicles the entire history of women's health and shows us where we must go next.

Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1987.

The language of pain merits an entire paper in its own right, but in order to define the scope and breath of this research undertaking (purely for viability) the focus is on what happens when women speak about their pain and not how they speak about their pain. Even though the language (of pain) is not a primary concern, Scarry's astute analysis
of the metaphors of pain is worth mentioning. It provides an interesting angle into the question of gender. If one agrees with Scarry's assertion that the language of pain is inherently the "the language of agency".

Godley, Joanne. "A Herstory of Pain." The Massachusetts Review 62.1 (2021): 33-42.

Godley's *A Herstory of Pain* is a perfect example of the the kind of research gap that exists in the domain of Pain Studies and the conversation that this research project wants to simultaneous build on and steer away from. Hers is a poignant look at the evolution of gynecology via painful non-consensual and frankly horrifying procedures that still underwrite this practice today. The article details how Sims "invites plantation owners in the area to send him their enslaved women with symptomatic childbirth induced fistulas. They oblige, because these women no longer have productive labor value" (Godley 35). And goes on to explain how Marion Sims "chooses to use no anesthesia during the multiple surgeries he performs on the enslaved women" (Godley 37). This type of research is important, and as Godley's imaginative article shows, is already being carried out.

Gonzalez-Polledo, Elena, and Jen Tarr. "The Thing About Pain: The Remaking of Illness Narratives in Chronic Pain Expressions on Social Media." New Media & Society 18.8 (2016): 1455-1472.

Although the article focuses on media other than narrative (especially photography)

and its potential to transform the experience of pain the points made about narrative might be useful for analysis. The authors state "illness narratives are co-authored by patients and doctorsin the clinical process of understanding the aetiology and prognosis of pain, and have been understood as key forms of communication through which people in pain make sense of the complexity of the illness experience and possibilities for healing" (Polledo and Tarr 230). Which in itself is a claim that requires unpacking especially the "co-authoring" of the two forces of the patient and doctor, when counter narratives show only one account is believed and forwarded. Additionally, this has consequences and puts into question claims like "story making has gained a central role in defining the method and purpose of the social science of health and medicine" (Polledo and Tarr 231). The authors posit the space of the internet, specifically Flickr and Tumblr, and the memes therein as "provocations that point at the systemic short comings of health services" (Polledo and Tarr 239).

Hirsch, Michele Lent. Invisible: How young women with serious health issues navigate work, relationships, and the pressure to seem just fine. Beacon Press, 2018..

Hirsch in this beautiful poignant and important series of interviews with many self identifying women (and a few non binary folks) in a narrative that she weaves together expertly tells us of the hardship "sick" women face. Especially those that are young and have an expectation placed upon them by society to be healthy and carefree. The interviews chronicle "How they feared being rejected if they mentioned their health issues. How that fear motivated them to hide the ways in which their bodies worked…rejections they'd experienced, in the workplace and in social settings, and how our culture led them to expect the worst even from partners, and bosses and friends who seemed to wholeheartedly accept them." (Hirch 3)

Gap in the Research field

An examination of the available literature indicates that whenever women's pain is theorised the conversation centres around childbirth, menstruation and sexual assault (genital pain) and on the other hand theoretical scholarship on and around pain is undifferentiated along the axis of gender. Such a foray into unexplored possible experiential realities of individuals is especially important for a field such as literature that draws on the various intersections of experience in order to produce richer and more complex narratives. Furthermore women's chronic illness as a whole has not received the attention it deserves considering not only the proportion of the population especially females , undergoing chronic ailments. Additionally the grouping together of diseases such as Fibromyalgia , Lyme, Lupus , IBS and CFS in the literary sphere in order to analyse and understand women's pain is a new and novel approach that marks a departure from a focus on the emotional and psychological.

BROAD AREA OF RESEARCH

"**An Exploration of Women's Chronic ailments in Selected Literary Works"** will try and analyze how women's pain especially chronic ailments have been missing from literary representation and literary analysis and the severe impact this has had on the literary realm, real-world diagnosis, and overall quality of life. Such an examination via literary representations will hopefully open more avenues of debate, on how women's pain can be taken more seriously and lead to a change in how women are treated specially at the hand of a patriarchal society.

PROPOSED CHAPTERIZATION:

- Introduction
- Lucy Frank's **Two Girls Staring at a Ceiling** and Talia Hibbert's ***Get a Life Chole Brown***
- J.H. Johnson's ***Diary of a Mad Lupus Patient***, Porochista Khakpour's ***SICK: A Memoir***.
- Julie Rehmeyer's ***Through the Shadowlands***
- Conclusion

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

1. To study the relationship between pain and gender.

2. To highlight how chronic ailments have been underrepresented by scholars. 3. To identify the characteristics of female pain by studying the selected works. 4. To examine how a patriarchal society neglects the depiction of chronic ailments experienced by women characters in the selected works.

5. To compare and contrast the works of the writers taken for the research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- The proposed methodology is qualitative and exploratory in nature, with an emphasis on close reading of primary and secondary texts. The objective is to critically analyze the instances of Chronic ailments pain in women.By virtue of the aim of the research work i.e., bringing to the forefront previously underrepresented or ignored aspects of the female pain experience in hope of providing better treatment the research is rooted in feminist thought.

  An analysis of the works previously identified will give a broad conception of how women's pain is comprehended in society and provide a direction and impetus for nuanced understanding.

Textual Analysis

PROPOSED OUTCOME

- The research hopes to bring to light the ordeals women have to face for their pain to be taken seriously by medical practitioners, partners, family, and friends alike. And how much better their lives could be if they are believed.
- It also brings to the forefront how writing about gendered pain experiences is critical to our understanding of not only our society and its treatment of gendered bodies but also the experience of pain and illness. It might be fruitful in categorizing literature along the lines of this gendered pain.
- By comparing and contrasting the writing of these writers we can also see some familiar patterns emerging which might give an insight into how far we've come into acknowledging this gendered reality and how far we still have to go.
- Hopefully, bringing such narratives to the forefront will allow for a change in how women's pain has been (mis)handled so far.

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